

Preface

Ted Hughes wrote in a wide range of modes which were informed by an even wider range of contexts to which his lifetime's reading, interests and experience gave him access. No single scholar could know all that Hughes knew or even have read all that Hughes had read during his sixty-eight years. But the thirty-four authorities who have combined their expertise here offer the most complete survey yet assembled of information and insights towards understanding Ted Hughes in context. In addition to being one of the major English poets of the twentieth century, all his life Hughes wrote poetry, criticism, letters, and stories and plays for children, many of them for radio. Early and late in his career, he wrote play scripts for radio and theatre, latterly making popular translations of both classical and modern plays. Indeed, his interest in translation is another life-long theme, as are his role as a literary critic and his collaboration with visual artists.

Hughes's letters often reveal to his correspondents just how the ideas behind the briefest of poems can be drawn from a vast range of cultural and literary contexts which, in his mind, are all connected. Writing to former Cambridge student friend, poet Peter Redgrove, about a poem for Shakespeare's birthday, 'An Alchemy', in 1973, Hughes references not only the

poem's starting point as an engagement with Shakespeare's *Venus and Adonis* but also 'the Mary Goddess of the Middle Ages', 'archaic Palestine, Babylon and Egypt', the English Civil War, Milton, 'Blake, Wordsworth, Keats, Hardy, (Hopkins), Yeats and Eliot' before saying, 'None of this is in the poem, but it shows you how I regard the ideas – which have grown like feathers [on] the dead end of things' (*LTH* 336). Tuning into the sources of ideas that grow within a text presents a complex challenge to the reader of Hughes's works since they draw upon a huge diversity of cultural sources, each having its own historical and literary resonances that have a particular significance in Hughes's reading of them. Indeed, Hughes admits to Redgrove in this letter that ultimately 'An Alchemy' is 'a literary historical comment rather than a poem', and it remained a poem that Hughes never collected. In fact, a reading of the Introduction to Hughes's recently published anthology, *A Choice of Shakespeare's Verse* (1971), would have been enough for a reader to appreciate this poem as a personal riff on the *Complete Works* charged with the narrative drive of what Hughes called 'the tragic equation' behind the *Works*. There are, at times, felicitous intimate juxtapositions of characters and images that attempt to move towards a kind of understanding 'deeper' than Prospero's 'sounding Book', which leaves the magician/poet, by the poem's end, in a final state of humility before Shakespeare's achievement. But Hughes was surely right to imply that, as a poem, it was one which was drowned by the weight of its contexts. As the poem itself hints, a 'sounding Book' is actually no longer even a book.

It is well known that at Cambridge in 1953 Hughes changed his studies from English to Archaeology and Anthropology, which opened up to him all the esoteric oral literatures of the world. But it also gave him access to cultural practices and functions of poetry, narrative and ritual drama that enriched his thinking about his own practices in the various genres in which he pursued a remarkably consistent artistic quest. It is not surprising, then, to realise that the ten groupings of contexts of his work explored in this book each inform the other and should not be regarded as entirely discrete categories. Any single chapter may be found to offer additional insights into any other. Where there might appear to be obvious gaps, it will be found that material is actually included elsewhere. A chapter specifically on Hughes's radio work, for example, is not included in the 'Genre Contexts' section because this aspect of his work is discussed in three other chapters: on drama, on his writing for children and the chapter on Hughes's use of voice. While Devon, Hughes's home from 1961, is not isolated as a chapter in 'Geocultural Contexts', it has a strong presence in chapters on 'Hughes and Agriculture', 'Hughes and Fishing' and 'Hughes's Environmental Campaigns'. A chapter on 'Hughes and Shakespeare' might be thought of as a serious omission here until one is reminded of Jonathan Bate's authoritative chapter on this subject in *The Cambridge Companion to Ted Hughes* (2011).¹ Likewise Ann Skea's essay on Hughes's Goddess, freely available on her Ted Hughes website, would be hard to surpass, and it is referenced here appropriately.²

The book begins by distinguishing Hughes's poetic interests and achievements in relation to his contemporaries, in particular, Thom Gunn, Philip Larkin and Seamus Heaney. It seems appropriate to end this opening section on 'Literary Contexts' with a consideration of 'Hughes's Literary Legacy'. There follow chapters on five different genres that mark Hughes's achievement in addition to that of a poet, for which a single chapter would be absurdly inadequate; the poetic achievement is so central to all his work that it is evidenced throughout this book. The five 'Stylistic Contexts' are necessarily selective but contain new material deftly discussed by experts in their fields. Similarly, a wealth of detail is revealed in the 'Geopolitical Contexts' of Yorkshire, America and Ireland. The sometimes difficult, or puzzling, area of Hughes's interests that might be called 'Anthropological Contexts' provides the opportunity to clarify the influences of religion, shamanism and the occult. Four chapters consider 'Historical Contexts' beginning with the literary importance of texts from the Middle Ages and ending with an understanding of Hughes's position in the tradition of the Laureateship. The two chapters on 'Gender Contexts' complement each other as issues of reception are discussed in relation to representations of gender identity in the works themselves. In 'Environmental Contexts' an overview of the shifts in Hughes's stances towards nature introduces interests dealt with in the following chapters on fishing, agriculture and environmental campaigning. Often acknowledged, but without detailed consideration, are Hughes's 'Educational Contexts', so these two chapters should

be recognised as pioneering Hughes scholarship. *Ted Hughes in Context* devotes its concluding grouping of chapters to an invitation to future students, researchers and biographers to explore the Hughes archives, offering a consideration of the challenges for biographers, not least from the 'Ted Hughes Myth' that the poet himself created.

No single book has, thus far, attempted to explore such a range of contexts within which Hughes wrote, although the twelve chapters of *The Cambridge Companion to Ted Hughes* (2011) might be considered as the first to approach such a project. *New Casebooks: Ted Hughes* (2015) took twelve different theoretical approaches to Hughes's works, and the latest collection of papers from what have now been seven international conferences on Hughes has been published as *Ted Hughes: From Cambridge to Collected* (Wormald, Roberts and Gifford, eds., 2013). A volume of essays from the 2015 conference, *Ted Hughes, Nature and Culture* (Roberts, Wormald and Gifford, eds.) is in preparation. Of course, Jonathan Bate's recent biography, *Ted Hughes: The Unauthorised Life* (2015), has renewed public interest in the poet, whilst recent monographs have included *Ted Hughes: The Haunted Earth* by Joanny Moulin (2015), *Ted Hughes* by Terry Gifford (2009) and *Ted Hughes: A Literary Life* by Neil Roberts (2006). Perhaps an indication of the depth of material available for discussion within just two contexts of his work are the publication of *Ted Hughes and the Classics* (2009) edited by Roger Rees and *Ted Hughes and Trauma* (2016) by Daniel O'Connor. Forthcoming books on other specific contexts

include *The Catch: Fishing for Ted Hughes* by Mark Wormald, *Ted Hughes: Environmentalist and Ecopoet* by Yvonne Reddick, *Ted Hughes and America* by Gillian Groszewski, *Ted Hughes and Medieval Literature* by James Robinson and *The Page Is Printed: Manuscript, Composition and Ted Hughes's Poetic Process* by Carrie Smith. All seven of these scholars have written chapters on their specialisms for *Ted Hughes in Context*.

Since 2011, The Ted Hughes Society has been publishing a peer-reviewed journal devoted to scholarship on Hughes. Monographs and edited collections of essays on Hughes's works continue to be published, reflecting the ongoing popularity of his writing with readers and within education at all levels, increasing internationally (a first book about Hughes's work appeared in Chinese in 2012 written by Chen Hong). Yet, we will have to wait for a follow-up to *Winter Pollen* of collected prose pieces and for further selections of letters. It is ten years since Christopher Reid made, in *Letters of Ted Hughes*, his selection of a quarter of what he said he could have assembled without diminution of quality or interest. 'Many of Hughes's letters are prose poems, magnificent works of art in their own right,' writes Jonathan Bate, anticipating that the letters between Hughes and Heaney in particular 'will come to be regarded as a literary monument akin to the letters that passed between Wordsworth and Coleridge or T. S. Eliot and Ezra Pound'.³ It is to be hoped that before too many letters are lost we shall hear of plans for a scholarly multi-volume *Collected Letters*, as has recently been published for Sylvia Plath. As Ted

Hughes was fond of writing as a dedication when he signed books for friends, 'Before us stands yesterday'. And hopefully, for readers of *Ted Hughes in Context*, before us stand newly informed and enriched readings of the works of Ted Hughes that this book hopes to make possible.

Notes

1. Jonathan Bate, 'Hughes on Shakespeare', in *The Cambridge Companion to Ted Hughes*, ed. Terry Gifford (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011), pp. 135–49. See also Neil Corcoran, *Shakespeare and the Modern Poet* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), pp. 223–41.

2. <http://ann.skea.com/THandGoddess.html>.

3. Jonathan Bate, *Ted Hughes: The Unauthorised Life* (London: William Collins, 2015), p. 555.